ABSTRACT
                Depressed individuals may filter or distort
environmental information in direct relationship to their self
perceptions. To investigate the degree of uncertainty about oneself
and others, as measured by consistent/inconsistent responses, 72
college students (32 depressed and 40 nondepressed) rated selected
adjectives from the Derry and Kuiper Depressed and Nondepressed
Content Word List according to how well the words described
themselves or a best friend. After the rating phase, subjects were
administered the Buss Self-Consciousness Scale and were
readministered the word list. An analysis of the results showed that
depressed college students were more inconsistent in self-schema than
their nondepressed counterparts. Nondepressed and mildly depressed
students used different information processing strategies.
Nondepressed students relied on congruence with the self-schema,
while depressed students used a strategy based on familiarity or
distinctiveness. (BL)

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The present study investigated the degree of uncertainty

about oneself and others in depressed and nondepressed college

students. The rationale for this study comes from a growing body

of research on schematic information processing in depression

(see, for example; Davis, 1979; Davis & Unruh, 1981; Derry &

Kuiper, 1981; Kuiper, Derry, & MacDonald, 1982). This research

conceptualizes the self as a cognitive structure, or schema, which

contains various attributes or representations of the self.

Additionally, the self-schema is presumed to influence the

encoding and processing of personally relevant information, such

that environmental information related to self or others may be

filtered or distorted (Kuiper, Oling ·, & MacDonald, in press).

Developmental models of self-schematic processing in

depression (e.g., Davis, 1979; Kuiper et al., 1982) have suggested

differences in the content and function of the self-schema between

individuals along an imaginary continuum from nondepression to

severe depression (Kuiper et al., 1982). Individuals at the

opposite ends of this continuum--nondepressed normals and

long-term clinical depressives--are characterized by relatively

powerful or strong self-schemas which efficiently organize and

process information congruent with the content of the self-schema.

Not surprisingly, the content of the self-schema differs for the

nondepressed and the clinically depressed individual. The
nondepressive's self-schema is characterized as containing
predominantly positive or at least nondepressed features, while
that of the long-term clinical depressive's is generally negative
or depressed in its content (Derry & Kuiper, 1981). It has also
been suggested (Davis, 1979) that individuals at the ends of this
nondepressed to severely depressed continuum are characterized by
relatively stable or consistent self-schemas, which in turn may
account for the stability of cognitive distortions of
environmental input.

Somewhere in the middle of this continuum lies the mild
depressive. Research (Kuiper & MacDonald, 1982) has found that,
unlike nondepressives or clinical depressives, the mild depressive
incorporates both depressed and nondepressed content in the
self-schema. Additionally, investigations of the functioning
capabilities of the self-schema have demonstrated a positive
correlation between the strength or efficiency of the self-schema
and self-reported duration of depression (Davis, 1979). These
findings have led the proponents of a developmental model of
self-schematic processing in depression to suggest that mild
depressives may be characterized by an inconsistent self-schema
(Davis, 1979). As such, the mild depressive's self-schema is
presumed to be relatively weaker than the self-schema of the
nondepressive or the more severe, clinical depressive, and also
contains conflictual positive and negative content.

The present study was designed to investigate this notion of
an unstable or inconsistent self-schema as a characteristic of
less severe depressives. It was predicted that depressed college

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students, who would fall somewhere in the middle of the nondepressed-severely depressed continuum, would be more inconsistent when describing themselves than would their nondepressed counterparts. Inconsistency was measured by determining the number of dissimilar ratings of descriptiveness across three presentations of an equal number of depressed and nondepressed personal adjectives. Thus, inconsistency would be reflected in terms of two yes and one no or two no and one yes descriptiveness ratings across the three presentations of a word and consistency would be indicated by three yes or three no descriptiveness ratings across the three trials. Additionally, the effects of the predicted inconsistency on the processing of information was examined by the inclusion of an incidental recognition task following the rating phase.

Method

Subject selection was determined by contacting university undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course who had scored at the lower and upper extremes on the Dempsey D-30 (D-30; Dempsey, 1964) compared to over 800 of their classmates. Thirty-two subjects who scored at the upper extreme on the D-30 and who also scored above 13 on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, 1978) administered at the time of the actual experiment comprised the depressed subject group. The nondepressed group consisted of forty subjects who scored at the lower extreme on the D-30 and who scored less than 5 on the Beck Depression Inventory.

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Subjects rated one of two sets of 32 adjectives selected from the 64-item Derry and Kuiper (1980) depressed- and nondepressed-content word list. Half of these adjectives were presented once and half were presented three times. Thus, each subject saw 8 depressed words presented one time, 8 depressed words presented three times, 8 nondepressed words presented one time and 8 nondepressed words presented three times. Subjects rated each word in terms of how well that word describes him or herself or how well that word describes his or her best friend. The inclusion of the familiar, well-liked other rating task was to investigate whether mild depressive's predicted inconsistency is generalized to include significant others and also to investigate some of the functional aspects of the self-schema.

Following the rating phase, subjects were administered the Buss Self-Consciousness Scale (Buss, 1980) to limit the effects of short-term memory. Subjects were then presented with a previously unannounced recognition test consisting of the 32 words from the rating phase and the remaining 32 words from the Derry and Kuiper word set which had not been presented previously.

Results and Discussion

For both ratings and recognition, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 4 analysis of variance was conducted with Depression (depressed, nondepressed) and Task (self, other) as between-subjects factors and Word Content (depressed, nondepressed) and Consistency/Descriptiveness as within-subjects factors. The four levels of the Consistency/Descriptiveness factor were consistent-descriptive (rated yes three times), consistent-nondescriptive (rated no three

times), inconsistent-descriptive (rated yes twice and no once),
and inconsistent-nondescriptive (rated no twice and yes once).

Since the focal point of the investigation was decision
inconsistency, I will present only those analyses which involved
the words presented three times during the study phase and confine
my remarks to summarizing some of the most important findings of
these effects. Likewise, in the interest of time, I will not be
discussing specific findings related to the significant other
rating task today, but I will be happy to provide further details
to anyone who wants them.

Insert Table 1 about here

In terms of ratings, as Table 1 shows, there was a
significant Depression x Word Content x
Consistency/Descriptiveness interaction (E (3,204) = 9.48, p <
.0001). Looking at the first two rows in Table 1, depressed
subjects were more likely to consistently rate a depressed word as
descriptive and less likely to consistently rate it as
nondescriptive than their nondepressed counterparts. And, as the
third and fourth rows show, depressed subjects were more likely to
be inconsistent in their ratings of depressed words than
nondepressed subjects , but significantly so only when the
inconsistency involved a word ultimately judged descriptive (i.e.,
two yes and one no, Ms = .97 vs. .32). For nondepressed words, in
the bottom half of Table 1, there were no differences between the

two groups in terms of either descriptiveness ratings or in terms of the consistency with which those ratings were made.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Focusing only on the self task, a priori mean comparisons generated from the nonsignificant Depression x Task x Word Content x Consistency/Descriptiveness interaction ($E < 1$) indicated that the two groups differ only in terms of depressed subject's inclusion of depressive content in their self-schema. As shown in Table 2, line 1, depressed subjects rated more depressed words consistently as descriptive of themselves ($M = 2.50$) than did nondepressed subjects ($M = .58$). Most importantly for the inconsistency hypothesis, as can be seen in line 3, there was a trend ($\pm (272) = 1.25$, $p < .11$) for depressed subjects to more frequently be inconsistent in their self ratings than nondepressed subjects ($Ms = 1.11$ and $.47$, for depressed and nondepressed subjects, respectively), although this inconsistency was limited to depressed words rated twice as descriptive and once as nondescriptive.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Table 3 summarizes recognition performance, and a significant Depression x Consistency/Descriptiveness interaction ($E (3,121) = 3.14$, $p < .03$) indicated that nondepressed subjects recognized

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words consistently rated descriptive (M = 3.66) better than those
rated nondescriptive (M = 3.42), thus indicating the
characteristic recognition benefits for schema-congruent material
over schema-incongruent material. Depressed subjects, on the
other hand, do not demonstrate enhanced recognition for
descriptive words over nondescriptive words. Rather, depressives
show a suprising recognition benefit for descriptive words rated
inconsistently (M = 3.84) over words rated consistently (M =
3.54). According to previous suggestions of self-schematic
investigators (e.g., Derry & Kuiper, 1981; Kuiper et al., 1982),
one would expect information which is highly organized and stable
to be processed and retrieved more efficiently than information
which the person is uncertain about. It may be that in the
absence of a well-integrated and powerful self-schema, mild
depressives may utilize an alternative processing strategy, such
as distinctiveness, when processing personal information.

Insert Table 4 about here

Looking at recognition only of self-rated items, as shown in
Table 4, it can be seen that while nondepressed subjects
recognized descriptive words better than nondescriptive words,
there were no recognition differences between depressed- and
nondepressed content words by the nondepressed subjects as had
been expected. Depressed subjects, on the other hand, recognized
nondepressed words better than depressed words, regardless of
whether those words had been rated as descriptive or as

nondescriptive. Consequently, whereas descriptiveness or degree of fit to one's self-schema seems to be an important variable in processing information by nondepressives, it appears that depressives utilize an alternative processing strategy. One possiblity is that depressives show processing benefits for nondepressed material over depressed material because they are more familiar with the nondepressed features of themselves, given that they have only recently begun to include depressed features in their self-concept.

In summary, these findings suggest that depressed college students are more inconsistent in terms of their self-schema than their nondepressed counterparts, although there are indications that this inconsistency is limited to the depressed components of the self. It also appears that nondepressed and mildly depressed college students may utilize different information processing strategies, with nondepressives relying on congruence with the self-schema while depressives use a strategy based on familiarity or distinctiveness.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Consistent and Inconsistent
Descriptiveness Ratings by Depressed and
Nondepressed College Students as a Function
of Word Content

	Subject Group	
	Depressed	Nondepressed
Depressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	1.94	.50
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	4.03	6.48
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1n)	.97	.32
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	1.06	.70
Nondepressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	5.78	6.13
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	1.19	1.02
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1n)	.59	.38
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	.44	.47

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Table 2

Mean Number of Consistent and Inconsistent
Self-Descriptiveness Ratings By Depressed and
Nondepressed College Students as a Function of Word
Content

	Subject Group	
	Depressed	Nondepressed
Depressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	2.50	.58
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	3.33	5.90
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1y)	1.11	.47
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	1.06	1.05
Nondepressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	5.61	6.11
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	1.50	.89
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1n)	.50	.47
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	.39	.53

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Table 3

Recognition Performance (d') by Depressed and

Nondepressed College Students as a Function of

Consistency and Descriptiveness

	Subject Group	
	Depressed	Nondepressed
Consistent		
Descriptive (3y)	3.54	3.66
Nondescriptive (3n)	3.55	3.42
Inconsistent		
Descriptive (2y-1n)	3.84	3.56
Nondescriptive (1y-2n)	3.73	3.34

Table 4

Recognition Performance (d') by Depressed
and Nondepressed College Students of Self-
Descriptiveness Rated Words as a Function
of Word Content and Consistency/Descriptiveness

	Depressed	Nondepressed
Depressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	3.18	3.73
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	3.35	3.40
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1n)	3.76	3.86
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	3.70	3.13
Nondepressed words		
Consistent-descriptive (3y)	3.54	3.66
Consistent-nondescriptive (3n)	3.75	3.28
Inconsistent-descriptive (2y-1n)	4.06	3.71
Inconsistent-nondescriptive (1y-2n)	3.70	3.41